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NEW YORK TIMES

30 May 1986

Rare Glimpse of a Secret Agency

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Special to The New York Times

BALTIMORE, May 29 — In three days of testimony in the espionage trial of Ronald W. Pelton, the Government has provided an unusual glimmer of insight into the workings of the National Security Agency while illustrating just how sensitive intelligence is about revealing its secrets on monitoring foreign communications.

Jurors were told that Mr. Pelton's information touched upon a wide variety of agency activities, revealing data about improvements to the agency's equipment, information about the locations of Soviet communications links that were being intercepted, the locations of two American signal collection activities, and evidence that the N.S.A. had penetrated the highest levels of Soviet military communications.

Federal prosecutors cited five agency projects to inform jurors about what type of secrets Mr. Pelton, a former agency employee, is accused of having sold to the Soviet Union.

While the projects were not identified, they were described briefly by the prosecutors, the Federal Bureau of Investigation agents who interrogated Mr. Pelton before his arrest in November 1985, and the defendant's former supervisors at the secretive N.S.A., which had headquarters in Fort Meade, Md.

At Least 'Top Secret'

In his opening statement, the prosecuting attorney, John Douglass, said that the agency did almost nothing that was not classified as at least "top secret."

Its job, he explained, is to handle signals intelligence, which involves data collected from radio signals, microwave transmissions or telephone lines. Much of the data is encrypted.

The prosecution then proceeded to tiptoe around the agency's work,

which Mr. Douglass called "one of the most significant means the nation has to protect itself."

In court, the prosecution spoke of Projects A, B, C, D and E. The Government, which argues that it does not need to describe fully the projects in order to convict Mr. Pelton, did not allege that these five programs were the only secrets he revealed.

Mr. Pelton, a staff official who in 1978 helped prepare a 60-page document used by several government agencies to keep track of intelligence-gathering operations, had "a broad overview of everything that is going on in the intelligence community," one of his supervisors at the agency, Donald R. Bacon, testified Tuesday, adding that the defendant's job involved planning budgets for many of the diverse technical programs used to collect and analyze intercepted communications, or signals.

Peek at a Project

For example, jurors were told, Project B involved a long-term effort to upgrade equipment used by the N.S.A., allowing signals to be processed more quickly. At the time Mr. Pelton is charged with having disclosed information on the project to the Soviet Union, it had not yet been completed, the prosecution said.

His disclosure, said Mr. Douglass, provided "valuable information about how quickly the U.S. is able to process and evaluate information."

Project B, the prosecutor continued, "involved equipment meant to be used for years and years."

The N.S.A. uses extremely powerful computers to analyze vast quantities of information, but whether Mr. Pelton's alleged disclosure of Project B concerned such technology was not mentioned at the trial. An F.B.I. agent, David E. Faulkner, testified Wednesday only that the defendant's alleged

disclosure helped the Russians "to know the inner workings of the N.S.A."

After the trial recessed Wednesday, the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council warned reporters covering the trial not to speculate on what information might have been compromised.

Policy Departure

Even the minute amounts of information disclosed at the trial, though, represent a departure for the agency from its usual policy of absolute discretion in discussing its activities. Another of Mr. Pelton's supervisors, Hubert Atwater Jr., said that Project A involved "a specific set of equipment" meant to eavesdrop on "a particular Soviet communications link."

Mr. Pelton is said to have known "the specific location of that link," and jurors were shown a map indicating where the link was.

The Washington Post, citing informed sources, reported on Wednesday that the map depicted the area near the Sea of Okhotsk, not far from the Russian port of Vladivostok.

Mr. Faulkner testified that Mr. Pelton told him that the Russians would read "y" understand the importance of Project A because of an episode which was not described in court, that occurred there 18 months to two years before Mr. Pelton is said to have sold the secrets in 1980. The prosecutor, Mr. Douglass, said the Soviet Union had taken countermeasures at the communications link to avoid disclosing "Soviet troop movements, maneuvers, plans and capabilities."

Three other projects mentioned by the prosecutors and witnesses, Projects C, D and E, did not seem to interest the Russians very much, Mr. Pelton was said to have told F.B.I. agents who interviewed him before his arrest.